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## STEPHEN'S DEFENSE BEFORE THE SANHEDRIN.

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By PROFESSOR EPHRAIM C. SHEDD,  
Lewis Academy, Wichita, Kan.

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STEPHEN'S defense before the sanhedrin has been admired for its thrilling and incisive rhetoric, and its extra-biblical details of history have proved a veritable Klondike of controversial nuggets. Perhaps this has distracted attention from the weightier questions as to what the new doctrines presented are, and whether they are important enough or presented with sufficient skill to justify the prominent place the speech holds in the book of Acts. In the following examination an attempt is made to determine these points by inductive study.

We must first grasp the actual situation as well as the text will permit. Before the advent of Stephen the narrative gives no hint that the church realized that her principles involved any break with the Jewish law. Their new faith made the converts more zealous in temple attendance, and the people of Jerusalem held them in high favor (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:12, 42). Great numbers joined them (Acts 2:46, 47; 4:4, 21; 5:13-15), including even many priests (7:7). The leaders of the opposition came throughout from the sadducean party or the high-priestly family (4:1, 5, 6; 5:17). They feared the results which a popular belief that Jesus, whom they had condemned, was the Messiah would have upon their influence. Subordinate to this was perhaps a dislike of the doctrine of the resurrection (4:2, 7, 10, 11; 5:17, 18, 28). The pharisaic party, which represented real Judaism, appears at the most only passive. When the sadducean opposition brought the matter before the sanhedrin, they met with signal failure. The people favored the apostles to the verge of violence (5:26). At the critical moment a great pharisaic leader advocated that nothing be done, on the ground that the

new teaching might actually be from God. The final decision was a lenient one (5:35-40).

With the advent of Stephen this is changed. The opposition is not directed against the apostles, but against him. It comes from the Pharisees, from one or more of the hellenistic synagogues. He is seized with the consent of "the people and elders and scribes" (6:12), and faces a bitterly hostile sanhedrin. An ardent follower of Gamaliel is eager for his death, and becomes the leader of the ensuing persecution, which soon involved the whole church. Yet traces of the former favor are perhaps seen in the burial permitted Stephen's body (8:2), and the subsequent immunity of the apostles (8:1). The narrative later pictures the Jerusalem church as still scrupulously keeping the law, and again enjoying somewhat the same toleration as at first, while the author of Acts plainly traces to those scattered by this persecution the beginning of the liberalizing process which culminated in the rise of the Gentile church. All this seems to imply that Stephen advocated new and unwelcome doctrines, and that the persecution was not directed primarily against the church as a whole, but against that section of it which sympathized with his teaching.

What this new teaching was must be gleaned from the charges made against him and from his defense. The people were stirred up by the cry that he spoke "blasphemous words against Moses and God" (6:11). Two accusations were brought before the sanhedrin: that he had contemned both the temple and the law, saying that Jesus of Nazareth would "destroy this place and change the customs delivered to us by Moses" (6:13, 14). The narrative declares the charges untrue, and upheld by perjured witnesses, yet there must have been some basis for even the falsest accusations.

But it was not in the witnesses that interest centered. The eyes of even his bitterest enemies were riveted upon the face of the prisoner, for it appeared transformed, as if it were the face of an angel. No faltering was there. The spirit which had filled his opponents with consternation in the past, the learning and skill which had silenced the keenest companions of Saul,

were with Stephen still, and he would use them as never before to proclaim his message. Yet he was in a peculiarly difficult position to do this at all. He dared not simply state his belief. As their subsequent conduct shows, they would have stopped their ears and hurried him to his death. He must first meet them on common ground in the Old Testament, and show them that he had arrived at his new teaching through the study of the Scriptures. He was facing the greatest and haughtiest scholars of his nation, and was grappling with them from a book which they knew by heart. He must be detailed and accurate. Subterfuges due to weakness or fear would have been instantly detected. The slightest slip would have ruined the force of the whole. Such is what the narrative would lead us to suppose.

The speech must now be analyzed. Here at first sight we see simply a popular historic account of early Jewish history. Closer inspection shows that some events are omitted which are equal to those given in importance or picturesqueness. The lives of Isaac and Jacob are untouched, while the story of the call of Moses occupies about a half of the whole. In the separate narratives the same selection can be seen. In vs. 2 we are told just where God first appeared to Abraham, while in vss. 8 and 9 one ignorant of the story might reasonably infer that all the twelve patriarchs sold Joseph into Egypt. Again, many of the details sound strangely out of place in a mere historic recital before the sanhedrin. Who, for instance, would ever assume that body ignorant of the signs of Moses being wrought "in Egypt and in the Red Sea and in the wilderness"? (vs. 36).

All this implies that Stephen was not simply relating the history of his nation, but was trying to show that a careful consideration of some of its events gave ground for certain particular beliefs, those no doubt which he had avowed. Plainly, then, if we carefully examine his words, especially noting what points are emphasized, his beliefs will unfold themselves to us as they did to his auditors, the effect of whose growing impatience, as his meaning became plainer, is distinctly marked in the speech. Viewed thus, a number of lines of thought are seen mingled, each rising into prominence where the narrative permits.

And first let us notice one which can be separated from the others, and is repeatedly brought out. Detailed geographical references are numerous. God first appeared to Abraham "in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran" (vs. 2), and again "removed him from Haran" (vs. 4). The word "Egypt" occurs six times in the account of Joseph (vss. 9-15). An angel appeared to Moses at Mt. Sinai (vs. 30), and he there received the Law from the angel, "which spake to him" (vs. 38). He performed his wonders on the way to the promised land (vs. 36). In all these cases the favor of God is signally shown in a land other than Palestine. As regards the latter, we find no words of reverence. Abraham was removed "into this land, wherein ye now dwell," and had no inheritance whatever in it (vss. 4, 5). The patriarchs, though buried, it was true, at Shechem, laid no claim to the land, but were placed in a tomb which their forefather had "bought, for a price, in silver, of the sons of Hamor" (vs. 16). In vs. 11 the old heathen name is used, as though putting it on a par with Egypt; and, finally, Joshua and his hosts "entered upon the possession of the nations" thrust out for them by God (vs. 45). When we reflect how such allusions must have grated on the current Jewish beliefs as to the holiness of their land, and why it was sacred, a new light breaks on the charge, "This man ceaseth not to speak words against this holy place" (6:13), and we feel anew the thrill in the reference to God's command at far-off Sinai: "Loose the shoes from thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground" (vs. 33). May not the reference to the "church (*ecclesia*, congregation) in the wilderness" (vs. 38) be intended to convey the inference that at one time the complete theocracy was independent of Palestine? Along the same line is the thought that the tabernacle, made according to the express directions of God, was first in the wilderness, and then served as the sanctuary in the land itself until the days of David (vss. 44, 45). As for the temple, permission to build it was granted at the special request of one of God's best-loved servants, and Solomon accordingly<sup>1</sup> erected it (vss. 46, 47).

<sup>1</sup> The Greek equivalent of "but," in vs. 47, is *δέ*.

Unable to proceed, Stephen next sums up his thought with a superb quotation from Isaiah (vss. 48-50; Isa. 66:2).

What, then, is the idea in all this? The prophet quoted did not censure the building of the temple, nor did Stephen. Yet God was to him one who had favored many lands with his presence. His blessings cannot be restricted to any one place, as though it were intrinsically holy. He turns from the disobedient, no matter where they offer their vows, and everywhere looks with favor upon the poor and contrite spirit who trembles at his word (*cf.* Isa. 66:2*b*). Stephen could scarcely have meant less than this, and it would be hard to prove that he meant more.

All this is to one side of the main narrative. Close inspection reveals two lines of thought here.

The key to vss. 4-8 lies in the emphatic clauses of vs. 5 in connection with vs. 8. On the one hand were the facts of Abraham's life. He had no inheritance on which to rest a hope of possessing the land, and no ground for expecting the continuance of his family. On the other hand was the promise, and how tremendous that promise, in view of those facts! To bind it to him and his descendants so that they might never forget or doubt it and its obligations, God ordained circumcision, quite likely one of the "customs which Moses delivered," touching which Stephen was accused. Here we are taken back to Genesis, chap. 17, where the covenant on the part of God is that he will be a God to Abraham and to his seed after him, which, however, is at once made concrete by the promise of the land. The covenant on the part of Abraham and his descendants is that they shall accept God and practice circumcision, which is described further as a "token of a covenant betwixt" God and his people (Gen. 17:7-11).

In the phrase, "covenant of circumcision," a definition seems to be intended, for the word "circumcision" alone would otherwise answer the purpose. Strictly speaking, in Genesis this rite is considered a God-given token, carrying with it the certainty of the fulfilment of the covenant by him. This is important, for in times of apostasy it would plainly stand simply

as a protest against Israel's faithlessness, and a reminder that God would none the less be faithful still. Such seems to have been Stephen's conception. Circumcision thus loses the all-important place which it held in Jewish eyes, and becomes instead the token of that which was really all-important, the covenant agreement that God would protect Israel and Israel would serve God. It was under these conditions, with these conceptions, Stephen then adds, that God, true to the promise, gave Isaac to Abraham, who circumcised him, and so it continued until the time of Joseph (vs. 8).

Then came the first departure. Jealousy caused Joseph's betrayal; yet famine at last brought his brothers to acknowledge their guilt by twice forcing them to beg for life from him (vss. 12, 13). At last, under his protection, the whole family went down into Egypt (vs. 14). Thus, too, began the fulfilment of what God had told Abraham when the promise was given, detailed in vss. 6 and 7. Israel was sojourning in a strange land.

We now come to the eve of the great fulfilment. So plain was the prophecy it would seem that no one could mistake it. The sojourn in Egypt was to last four hundred years (vs. 6, quoted from Gen. 15: 13). This time was drawing to a close (vs. 17*a*). The people meantime had grown into a nation, and so were fit for mighty tasks (vs. 17). Deliverance was to be preceded by bondage (vs. 6). They groaned under the exactions of a king who "knew not Joseph." At the royal court of their oppressors, preserved from death when a babe in a most remarkable manner (vss. 20, 21), now by training and ability able to cope with the Egyptians, and already renowned for his wisdom and deeds (vs. 22), Moses stood forth far above all his countrymen at the very time the great deliverance was to be expected. He recognized the mission for which providence had prepared him, and supposed his brethren would also; "but they understood not" (vs. 25). So thorough was his rejection that in utter despair he not only fled, but married and settled down for life in Midian (vs. 29). The nation had forgotten God's covenant promise and spurned his messenger. How sad and solemn are his words:

"I am the God of thy fathers, the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob"—they only had been wholly faithful to him (vs. 32). Yet he was true to the covenant. The second call came overwhelmingly from him, for Moses was first drawn to the bush by simple curiosity (vs. 31), and it was God himself who spoke. The brethren of Moses had rejected him as deliverer and as ruler (vss. 24, 26–28), but he was sent back to be both (vs. 35). The mighty deeds of his after-life only made the contrast between the people's blindness and God's choice the more terrible.

It seems unnecessary to pursue the narrative farther. At vs. 41 it becomes hurried and abrupt. The apostasies of the forty years' wanderings are summarized in a quotation from Amos (5: 25–27), and a parallel between them and the acts of the later Jews is implied by substituting "And I will carry you away beyond Babylon" for the "beyond Damascus" of the prophet (vs. 43). Another noticeable parallel is implied in the term "our fathers," which becomes more frequent toward the end (vss. 11, 38, 39, 44, 45).

To Stephen the early history of his people seems to have appeared an almost continual rejection of God, in striking contrast to which was his constant faithfulness to them. We of course need not assume that this was all Stephen saw in that history. The picture is striking and somber.

When at last the anger of his hearers compelled him to break off, what was in his mind burst from his lips without further illustration. The few burning words which follow the quotation (vss. 51–53) are of great importance. The phrase, "uncircumcised in heart and ears," in drawing a distinction between true circumcision, that of the heart, and the outer one, is remarkable and goes far to confirm what has already been said on this point. In conformity with his treatment of the patriarchal history he accuses the Jews of having always forsaken the law and persecuted those who would bring them back. He affirms that the law, when rightly interpreted, stood in glorious harmony with the prophets and with Jesus himself. Jesus had truly fulfilled it, he was the "Righteous One" (vs. 52), and, far



from standing without its pale, had been foretold both by it (vs. 37) and by the prophets (vs. 52). Stephen thus considered himself a restorer of old, not a teacher of new truth. It was precisely on this ground that he based his whole appeal to the sanhedrin.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to say just how far he went along the lines which he opens. The temple was to him a symbol of God's universal presence, and circumcision an outward reminder of a solemn spiritual compact. Outward ceremonial thus lost its value save as it sprang from or induced a condition of inner spiritual health. We can scarcely say more than this. The ideas he broached, when developed to their logical conclusion, perhaps went much farther than he himself perceived. They were certainly thus developed by the movement which began at his death and resulted in the founding of the Gentile church. Stephen was the seer who first proclaimed a glimmer of light upon the eastern sky; whether or not he perceived that this foretold the speedy rising of a glorious dawn we may not say.